

How to Format a College Essay

1st Paragraph: **A Tension-Filled Scene**

Use your opening paragraph to drop the reader into the middle of a **concrete scene** filled with **tension**. Zoom in on a brief **moment** of the interaction when the tension is highest, and capture that moment using vivid description. Your account of the tension should hook the interest of readers and make them want to keep reading.¹

Write this paragraph using the **first-person point of view**. Enable your readers to inhabit the shoes of the person who you were at the time when the event(s) happened. Describe the feelings you were experiencing in the moment. Use the **present tense** to generate a sense of immediacy.

In this paragraph, you'll be demonstrating your skills in **descriptive** writing.

2nd Paragraph: **Context**

Use your second paragraph to zoom out and provide a broader **context**: who, what, where, when. When and where did the event(s) take place? What led to the tension-filled situation? What kind of person were you then?

Write this paragraph using the first-person point of view. But shift into the **past tense** to clarify that you are now narrating from the perspective of who you are today.²

In this paragraph, you'll be demonstrating your skills in **informative** writing.

3rd Paragraph: **Narration**

Now return to the scene in your first paragraph and develop it into a **narrative**. What happened next? And after that? Tell a story using some of the techniques of narrative writing: foreshadowing, suspense, dialogue, humor, and so on. Make sure to recount how the tension in your first paragraph gets **resolved**. You will probably need to devote at least two or three paragraphs to this section of the essay.

In this paragraph, you'll be demonstrating your skills in **narrative** writing.

4th Paragraph: **Narration** (cont.)

Same as above.

5th Paragraph: **Reflection**

Use your last paragraphs to **reflect** back upon your experiences from the perspective of who you are today. How did the experience push you to **grow** or **change**? What did you **learn**? Reflect back on your experiences and elaborate upon any lessons learned — recognizing that the writing process itself may help you to clarify such lessons. Devote at least two or three paragraphs to this section of the essay.

This section of your essay is where you demonstrate that you are a thoughtful human being who is capable of reflecting back on his/her experience and learning something from it. Students typically find this section to be the most difficult to write. But because colleges are looking for thoughtful and reflective students, this is the most important part of a college application essay. So please devote extra time to it!

In this paragraph, you'll be demonstrating your skills in **reflective** writing.

6th Paragraph: **Reflection** (cont.)

Same as above.

1. In this paragraph you do *not* need to provide your reader with contextual information. That is, you do not need to explain when and where the event took place, who the central characters were, or how you got into the tension-filled situation. By withholding that information, you will generate a sense of mystery and elicit the reader's desire to learn more.

2. By shifting into the past tense, you will signal to the reader that your essay contains a double narrative perspective. That is, you will signal to the reader that the narrator of the second paragraph (i.e. who you are now) is different from the narrator of the first paragraph (i.e. who you were then). And you will set yourself up to conclude the essay by reflecting back on what happened to you then from the perspective of who you are now. Because your reader will have been introduced to this present-day narrative perspective, the reader won't be confused when, in the concluding paragraphs, you use the past tense to look back upon your experiences, to reflect upon the lessons you learned, and to explain how you were changed by your experiences.